

FirstNet opts for nationwide acquisition approach for final RFP

Urgent Communications By Donny Jackson

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[FirstNet](#) board members today unanimously approved a resolution to accept only national deployment offers for its final request for proposal (RFP), removing the possibility that a bidder could be selected to build out the network for a single state or region.

“After careful analysis and weighing the pros and cons, FirstNet management recommends to the board that the acquisition approach should follow a nationwide-provider-solution approach,” FirstNet CEO Mike Poth said while introducing the resolution during the board meeting, which was webcast. “The nationwide-solution approach will assure a comprehensive network solution for public safety. This solution is responsible for all 56 states and territories and inherently will deliver a more consistent package of products and services for public safety.”

Although FirstNet is adopting a nationwide acquisition approach, Poth stressed that the RFP would include measures that would ensure that there is a “meaningful role” for rural telecom carriers and small businesses, which are expected to be part of a nationwide offerer’s team.

“We believe that, by recommending these decisions now, this promotes proactive partnership discussions well in advance of the RFP, and it encourages the highest level of small-business and rural-telecommunications-provider engagement,” Poth said.

FirstNet Vice Chairman Jeff Johnson echoed this sentiment and said he believes the winning bid will include a “marriage” of a large provider that can provide coverage in major urban areas and smaller providers that will address public-safety needs for rural coverage. In fact, FirstNet needs rural telecom providers to participate “or we can’t achieve our goals,” he said.

“I applaud our board for the insight to say what we’re saying today [and] to say it three months before our RFP is going to be released, so that those people that need to create partnerships and need to create teaming have the time to do it,” Johnson said.

“You want a shot? Here’s three months notice about how to create a shot—how to bring your assets and capabilities to the table and how to pair that with somebody that’s going to bring us a nationwide deployment to serve public safety.”

Poth said that nationwide offers will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Coverage and capacity,
- Products and architecture,
- Pricing,
- Business management,
- Past performance and
- Use of existing infrastructure.

In [FirstNet](#)’s draft RFP released in April, the organization proposed two possible bid scenarios for an offerer—potentially a single commercial company but more likely a prime contractor heading a team of companies—to bid on the much-anticipated public-safety broadband network: Services offered on a nationwide basis (Category 1) or services offered on a regional basis, covering a geographic region as small as a single state (Category 2), that would then be integrated into the nationwide system.

However, there was considerable confusion within the industry about how the Category 2 integration would work. With today’s resolution, only nationwide bids will be accepted, and any coordination between multiple providers could be done before the RFP response is submitted, instead of trying to get multiple bidders to alter their proposals to deliver a seamless nationwide system after the RFP process is done.

“Partnering is hard, and it’s not easy to create those win-win relationships,” FirstNet board member Barry Boniface said during the meeting. “I think the conversation that we had was that forcing partnerships at the FirstNet level was not the way to go about this but to move this back into the hands of people who are used to partnering.

“[In] every national solution that’s out there today—I don’t care what it is, even if it’s delivering long-distance service—there are partnerships that have been created to deliver those outcomes. Ultimately, what we’ve decided ... with this approach is that partnering is better left in the hands of the people who are used to doing it on a day-to-day basis, rather than being forced [by FirstNet].

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